

Training Is Déjà Vu; Education Is Vu Jàdé

■ By Christopher R. Paparone, Ph.D., and George L. Topic Jr.

The call for creative practitioners, innovative solutions, and novel approaches to the complex challenges facing our nation has never been stronger. Our most senior logisticians are committed to developing future practitioners who are able to deal with uncertainty. In fact, to embrace uncertainty as normal and natural is central to working in today's operational environment.

It is clear that the educational institutions within the Department of Defense struggle to meet this important challenge. Between the two of us, we have observed for more than 40 years many attempts to list attributes and competencies associated with leader development.

These lists are usually associated with growth through progressive levels and focus on rank and position. These efforts often seem to suggest that if we closely adhere to a carefully planned process, we will produce the practitioners we need.

We are not convinced this is the best way to frame the process of educating logistics practitioners and would like to offer another approach. In lieu of lists and levels, we need first to draw a conceptual line between training and education.

Traditional training assumes that problems repeat over time; hence, the central theorem for logistics training is that of déjà vu—a feeling that we have seen this situation before. The body of knowledge captured through lessons learned and doctrine provides ready-made solutions or perhaps a tentative baseline for future solutions.

Readiness for these recurring problems is a matter of making the solutions (in the form of individual, unit, and higher organization actions) routine. Key to conveying measures of readiness are clearly articulated tasks, conditions, and standards. In the

military logistics realm, we know, for example, that there are routine procedures to control the quality and tactical distribution of fuel under a variety of conditions.

On the other hand, we argue that logistics education should be oriented on “vu jàdé”—the sense that this has never happened before. Karl E. Weick in his 2011 article in the *Journal of Change Management* argues that we may have an unreflective proclivity to exercise our trained routines even when facing complex, novel situations. He adds that these contexts require hunches or “conceptual substitutions for perceptual experience.”

As strange as it may sound, this art of conjecture is more closely aligned with poetry than with hard science. What may surprise the sustainment community is that detailed studies of history, the fine arts, and other subjects in the humanities may actually help hunch-making, which is a vu jàdé learning process.

For example, while we have developed a military science for fueling operations, we may find creative ways to change our conceptual schemes of how we procure and distribute fuel altogether. Helping students become good at creating new concepts to deal with novel situations is the challenge of education.

Unfortunately we do not capture the need for what Weick calls a “nuanced appreciation” of the uniqueness at hand. Educating logisticians—and practitioners in general—should focus more on developing stratagems while work is in action. We instead focus on after-action learning, to include naming a new approach and eventually categorizing it as a new doctrinal term or task.

We become preoccupied with re-creating the situation during training and assuming that our task-based

science is repeatable, sharable, and progressive. Categorically thinking and acting (routines linked to déjà vu) are valued more than the process of concept creation (education associated with vu jàdé). This is because routines are easier to understand and teach.

This is the cultural blind spot we believe is keeping our community of practice from fully embracing uncertainty and operational complexity. We could overcome this problem by developing education processes that place less emphasis on programs of instruction (training routines) oriented on previously decided actions, well-defined competencies, and highly categorized functions.

We recommend that defense educational institutions focus more on open-ended, imaginative learning activities that value reflective thought and hunch-making in practitioners and the organizational culture. We would be well-served to have more logisticians who are creative conceptualizers in a new tradition of vu jàdé.

Complex thinking in a complex world requires a logistician to recognize the uniqueness of each situation and have the confidence to exercise newfound hunches. The irony of this educational approach is that recognizing and dealing with the reality of vu jàdé actually becomes something practitioners have sensed before.

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